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ABSTRACT

Internships, a valuable part of mass communication education, require hard work, cooperation, communication, realistic and clear expectations, instruction, and patience from students, faculty supervisor, and employer. The faculty internship director is the middleman in this undertaking, which requires considerable work and time. Problems in internships may result from unprepared interns, unrealistic expectations, sexual harassment, or over-commitment on the part of the intern to other activities. Finally, opportunities for internships locally in the general field of mass communications (such as in local radio or doing public relations for local non-profit offices) should not be overlooked. (SR)

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MASS COMMUNICATION INTERNSHIPS:
PROBLEMS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

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Few involved in the process of broadcast education would dispute the value of internships. Lynn Schafer Gross explains the obvious benefits in her helpful booklet The Internship Experience (1981). The broadcasting student can learn more about the nature of the entire career area. He or she is placed in an environment where the classroom theory can be applied to real work situations. And important contacts are frequently made which might lead to an improved resumé at least and a paid job after graduation at best. Most serious mass communication students who read Gross' book, talk to past students who have done internships, or attend college career days or professional conventions would agree on the importance of doing an internship prior to college graduation.

All is not sunshine and roses in the internship business, however. It takes a lot of hard work on the parts of the student, faculty supervisor, and employer to make an internship rewarding and successful. Cooperation and communication are essential among all parties. Expectations must be realistic and clearly established. Instruction must occur. And, perhaps above all, patience must be exercised.

The purpose of this paper is to describe instances wherein the mass communication internship (broadcast, cable, or PR) proved less than ideal. By examining problems we can explore potential solutions. Some of the problems were the result of unrealistic expectations on the part of students. Other problems occurred when students felt themselves more prepared for the work environment than they really were. In some instances, the employers had little or no time to provide instruction; they used the students merely as "go-fers." In at least one instance, sexual harassment became an issue between intern and employer. The problems and disillusionments are at times made larger by the student who perceives himself or herself to be caught in

the middle: trying to please the employer and do the work as well as a paid staffer might, and obtaining a good grade and academic credit from the college that at times seems remote and unrelated.

The Faculty Internship Director

Before getting involved as the director or co-ordinator of mass communication internships within an academic department, the faculty member needs to realize that this position involves work and it involves time. Some departments grant release time to this individual; others might like to, but cannot due to required teaching duties. In any case, however, the faculty member will need to be prepared to spend a good deal of time talking to students in the office, talking to the interns' supervisors on the phone, and driving to and from various radio and TV stations or PR firms checking up on the interns' progress or trying to resolve problems.

The internship director is the middleman, getting requests from students about internship opportunities on one hand (and frequently being unable to place all the students into exactly what they want), and getting requests from companies or agencies looking for student interns on the other hand (and often being unsuccessful on that end, too). It is the job of an employment agency, a personnel director, a psychologist, and a marriage counselor all rolled into one. And with the interest in mass communication growing among college students, it is a job that keeps the faculty member busy. He or she will be distinguished from professors in such disciplines as philosophy or English where internships are rare or non-existent by a sometimes disillusioned, sometimes satisfied, usually puzzled, and almost always exhausted demeanor. It's a tough job, as they say, but somebody's got to do it.

Why Problems are Bad News

Everyone wants a positive internship experience. When one turns out to be negative, for whatever reason, the effects can be far-reaching. The student looks bad. The faculty internship director appears incompetent. The academic department may end up getting a reputation (deserved or undeserved) for inadequately preparing its broadcast students. The TV or radio station is unhappy. Nobody comes out a winner.

The potential problems associated with an internship are several. Some are the fault of the student, some can be traced to the school or department, and others just seem to result from some poor chemistry between the intern and the employer. A few of these problems are discussed below, along with some suggested approaches to preventing or solving them.

Unprepared Interns

There should be no such thing as an unprepared intern, only unprepared students. We as educators must work diligently to ensure that our unprepared students do not go out into the field--representing themselves, their department, and their college--and do an internship. They must know their craft and be able to demonstrate writing skills and equipment skills. Good grades are not enough. They won't be taking tests or writing book reports at the local NBC affiliate.

The unprepared student must be weeded out before he goes out on an internship. He must get his skill level up to a standard that will enable his employer to get some use out of him within a week or two. As a faculty supervisor, it is necessary to look at GPA but not solely at GPA. I have had

students with high GPA's that may have been good at learning the theory and even better at taking written tests, but who had great difficulty in operating audio or video equipment. The creation of an exit or proficiency exam in the practical courses is not a bad idea for determining a potential intern's capabilities.

Unrealistic Expectations

A majority of internship problems result from students who have unrealistic expectations of the internship experience. They expect their supervisor to provide systematic instruction in every phase of the broadcast operation in the same way that their college professors guided them through a course in economics or film history. Our students have a right to expect that learning will occur. They must realize, however, as Julius K. Hunter of KMOX-TV, St. Louis, said: "There are often precious few minutes for an assignment editor to give an intern the telephone number and name of the source and a list of questions to be asked in pursuit of vital information. It is often faster for the assignment editor to go on and make the call him/herself" (Gross 43).

A common unrealistic expectation held by some students going out on an internship experience is that he/she can show up anytime, just like class. Those students must learn at once that there is no such thing as a cut policy or a make-up exam in the employment world. Repeated absences with no good reason will usually result in termination of the intern by the supervising employer.

Another misconception is that the student will be allowed to step right in and begin using all the expensive studio equipment. Many broadcast

facilities are union shops and only card-carrying union members are allowed to operate certain equipment or perform certain tasks. Few internships allow the student to have the run of the studio and the student needs to be apprised of that fact early before expectations get too high. Broadcast equipment is very expensive and it is needed to put the final product on the air; station managers rarely turn it loose in inexperienced hands.

The idea that the intern will do some important job is yet another misconception. Even with union rules explained and the valuable equipment placed off-limits, some students feel they should be permitted to produce the nightly news, or serve as field reporter on the important local crime story, or do the weekend sports anchoring. The fact of the matter is simply that this business has gotten along fine before the intern arrived and can continue doing so without him or her. There is no room for prima donna interns. He or she will have to be patient, ready to seize the opportunity when it does present itself, and pay his/her dues just like everybody else.

The other side of the coin is represented by the employer who expects the intern to be a cross between Ed Murrow and Roone Arledge. This employer is unusually demanding of the student, whom he treats as an experienced paid staff member, capable of working with no supervision whatsoever. When the student cannot live up to these expectations, the employer may over-react and designate him or her as "permanent go-fer." Not wanting to quit, the student stays on in this role, hoping to salvage something, if only credit hours. The faculty member must generally intervene in such cases.

Handling these unrealistic expectations from either the student or the employer can be a real challenge. Above all, it takes tact and communication skills. The faculty internship co-ordinator must make every effort to select only the most mature, experienced, and level-headed students to apply for

internships. He must be a good judge of both personality and ability, and steer the over-eager, impatient, or self-impressed student away from internships and into some other direction, like campus extra-curricular activities or competitions.

Communication with the employer is very important. If the employer wants an intern who already knows how to edit video-tape, he needs to say so. If the school cannot provide such a person at that time, the professor must be honest and say so also. If the student can edit 1/2-inch or 3/4-inch tape, and the employer is working with 1-inch, that information must be exchanged, along with the feeling that most likely he/she could quickly learn the larger format based on the idea that principles will transfer. The faculty member must be honest in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the student and the academic program from which he or she is coming. Unfortunately, some broadcast professionals expect an unreasonable level of technical competence from student interns, most of whom have never worked on or even seen professional broadcast equipment.

Special Problems

Occasionally a special problem will arise that deserves attention. The case of the pretty young coed who gets propositioned on the job by her supervisor is probably not as uncommon as we might wish to think. Such a situation places all concerned parties in an awkward position. At the risk of endangering the future of a good internship opportunity, if such behavior persists and a grade recommendation is involved, the charges must be investigated. A determination must be made in cases of sexual harassment regarding the advisability of placing future interns with that company.

The student who gets paid a salary or commission while doing a credit internship may represent another problem. The mass communication/marketing double major who spends a summer selling cable TV for his uncle might be milking the credit internship for more than it really is. Where does the internship leave off and the summer job begin? The internship coordinator and the academic department must take the background and career goals of the student into consideration when lining up such paid internships and deciding if credit will be appropriate. A written policy is most useful.

A problem arises when the department's official internship policy specifies a minimum GPA and a very bright prospect comes along, well-suited in every way to a particular internship, except for that GPA. It is just a bit too low. Cases like this happen more often than one might imagine. One reason is that the student has been very active in clubs, activities, or part-time jobs and passes all courses with C's. He or she has some experience, a good deal of maturity, and plenty of motivation. Rather than reject the notion of an internship for such a person who would seem to benefit from it, an alternative might be proposed. The non-credit internship, especially over the summer, can help the student learn while preserving the academic policy of the department regarding GPA. Some companies will accept a non-credit intern and be grateful for it; others insist that the student be part of an official internship course with credit and a grade ensuing.

Another type of special problem results from the placement into an internship of a student who is qualified, bright, energetic, but over-committed to other things. The student who is expected to work 20 hours a week at Cable News Network in Atlanta only has room in his/her schedule for so many other things. If he tries to carry an additional load of 15 credit hours of academic coursework, plus work a weekend job at the local radio

station, prepare a resumé tape and go out on interviews, and devote time and energies to his girlfriend, something usually has to suffer. For the sake of all parties--the student, school, and company--that something should not be the internship. A good, valuable internship takes time and effort to establish and should be prized and pursued full-time. Students must be advised not to take other classes at the college while interning, especially when the position is in another city and considerable commuting time is involved. The best internship experiences seem to be those wherein the student totally immerses himself in the job, putting in several hours each day of the week, living nearby the place of employment, and not taking additional coursework at the college which competes for time and energy. To the extent that the student can afford the "luxury" of such a concentrated internship (and, admittedly, not all can), the student should be encouraged to do so. Even the price of a graduation delayed by one quarter or semester is not too high for the educational benefit to be derived.

Internships that go Begging

Everybody wants to get into broadcast TV. There just are not that many openings because there are not that many TV stations. Most are in large cities, far away from college campuses, too far to commute to, too expensive to live nearby. Many are union shops with employees that get nervous if an intern even looks at a TV camera or teleprompter.

Opportunities in local radio are abundant, both as unpaid internships and as hourly paid part-time jobs. Few students want to do radio news in a little town seemingly unrelated to the city or suburbs they call home. Few want to try their hands at PR, doing press releases for the Parks and Recreation

Department or the local office of the American Cancer Society. As internship directors in colleges and universities we need to educate our students about the value of alternative internship or co-op experiences in the general field of mass communication. The student who wants to someday be an anchor on the CBS Evening News can benefit from experiences in cable and satellite TV, corporate video, local radio news, tele-conferencing, or non-profit public relations. We can only enlarge our students' perspectives by enlarging our own.

NOTES

Gross, Lynne Schafer. The Internship Experience. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1981.